The Light in the Clearing

A Tale of the North Country in the Time of Silas Wright

By IRVING BACHELLER

Author of "Eben Holden," "D'ri and I," "Darrel of the Blessed Isles" "Keeping Up With Lizzie," Etc., Etc.

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Barton Baynes, orphan, is taken to live with his uncle, Peabody Baynes, and his Aunt Deel on a farm on Rattleroad in a neighborhood called Lickitysplit, about the year 1826. Barton meets Sally Dunkelberg, about his own age, but socially of a class above the Bayneses, and is fascinated by the pretty face and fine clothes.

CHAPTER II—Barton meets Roving Kate, known in the neighborhood as the "Silent Woman." Amos Grimshaw, young son of the richest man in the township, is a visitor at the Baynes home, and Roving Kate tells the fortunes of the two boys, predicting a bright future for Barton and death on the gallows for Amos. Reproved for an act of boyish mischief Barton runs away, intending to make his home with the Dunkelbergs. He reaches the village of Canton and falls into a sleep of exhaustion on a porch. There he is found by Silas Wright, Jr., prominent man in public affairs, who, knowing Peabody Baynes, takes Barton home after buying him new clothes.

CHAPTER III—Barton and his uncle and aunt visit Canton and hear Silas Wright read a sermon.

CHAPTER IV—Silas Wright evinces much interest in Barton, and sends a box of books and magazines to the Baynes home. The election of Silas Wright to the United States senate is announced.

CHAPTER V—When Barton is twelve years old he becomes aware of the existence of a wonderful and mysterious power known as "Money," and learns how, through his possession of that wonderful thing, Grimshaw is the most powerful and greatly dreaded man in the community, most of the settlers being in his debt. After a visit to the Baynes home Mr. Wright leaves a note in a sealed envelope, which Barton is to read on the first night when he leaves home to attend school.

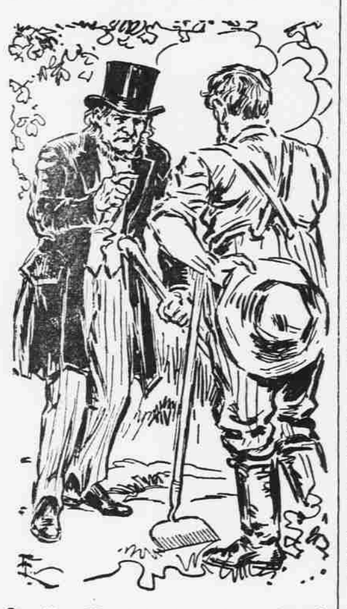
CHAPTER VI—Barton is asked to drive a load to mill, arrives safely, but in a snowstorm, unable to see the road, the horses get into the ditch and a wheel of the wagon is broken. Uncle Peabody manages to get together enough to satisfy Grimshaw and obtain an extension.

CHAPTER VII—Now in his sixteenth year Barton accompanies "Mr. Purvis," the hired man, to the postoffice at Canton. On the way they meet a rider, and the three journey together. They are held up by a man with a gun, who makes the highwayman's demand of "Your money or your life." Purvis runs away, while the stranger draws a pistol, but before he can use it the robber shoots and kills him. Barton's horse throws him and runs away. As the murderer bends over the stranger Barton throws a stone which he observes wounds the thief, who makes off at once, but not until Barton had noted that his gun stock was broken in a peculiar manner. Search of the neighborhood for the robber is unavailing and the stranger is buried.

CHAPTER VI.

My Second Peril.

One day Mr. Grimshaw came out in the field to see my uncle. They



One Day Mr. Grimshaw Came Out in the Field to See My Uncle.

walked away to the shade of a tree while the hired man and I went on with the hoeing. I could hear the harsh voice of the money-lender speaking in loud and angry tones and presently he went away.

"What's the rip?" I asked as my uncle returned looking very sober.

"We won't talk about it now," he answered.

In the candle-light of the evening Uncle Peabody said:

"Grimshaw has demanded his mortgage money an' he wants it in gold coin. We'll have to git it some way I dunno how."

"W'y of all things!" my aunt exclaimed. "How are we goin' to git all that money—these hard times?—ayes! I'd like to know?"

"Well, I can't tell ye," said Uncle Peabody. "I guess he can't forgive us for savin' Rodney Barnes."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"Why, he says we hadn't no business to hire a man to help us. He says you an' me ought to do all the work here. He thinks I ought to took you out o' school long ago."

"I can stay out o' school and keep on with my lessons," I said.

"Not an' please him. He was mad when he see ye with a book in yer hand out there in the corn-field."

What were we to do now? I spent the first sad night of my life undoing the plans which had been so dear to me but not so dear as my aunt and uncle. I decided to give all my life and strength to the saving of the farm. I would still try to be great, but not as great as the Senator.

One day in December of that year, I had my first trial in the full responsibility of man's work. I was allowed to load and harness and hitch up and go to the mill without assistance. My uncle and Purvis, our hired man, were busy with the chopping and we were out of flour and meal. It took a lot of them to keep the axes going. So I filled two sacks with corn and two with wheat and put them into the box wagon, for the ground was bare, and hitched up my horses and set out.

I reached the mill safely and before the grain was ground the earth and the sky above were white with snow driving down in a cold, stiff wind out of the northwest. I loaded my grists and covered them with a blanket and hurried away. The snow came so fast that it almost blinded me. There were times when I could scarcely see the road or the horses. The wind came colder and soon it was hard work to hold the reins and keep my hands from freezing.

Suddenly the wheels began jumping over rocks. The horses were in the ditch. I knew what was the matter, for my eyes had been filling with snow and I had had to brush them often. Of course the team had suffered in a like manner. Before I could stop I heard the crack of a felly and a front wheel dropped to its hub. I checked the horses and jumped out and went to their heads and cleared their eyes. The snow was up to my knees then.

How the thought of that broken wheel smote me! It was our only heavy wagon, and we having to pay the mortgage! What would my uncle say? The query brought tears to my eyes.

I unhitched and led my horses up into the cover of the pines. How grateful it seemed, for the wind was slack below but howling in the treetops! I knew that I was four miles from home and knew not how I was to get there. Chilled to the bone, I gathered some pitch pine and soon had a fire going with my flint and tinder. I knew that I could mount one of the horses and lead the other and reach home probably. But there was the grist. We needed that; I knew that we should have to go hungry without the grist. It would get wet from above and below if I tried to carry it on the back of a horse. I warmed myself by the fire and hitched my team near it so as to thaw the frost out of their forelocks and eyebrows. I felt in my coat pockets and found a handful of nails—everybody carried nails in one pocket in those days—and I remember that my uncle's pockets were a museum of bolts and nuts and screws and washers.

The idea occurred to me that I would make a kind of sled which was called a jumper.

So I got my ax out of the wagon and soon found a couple of small trees with the right crook for the forward end of a runner, and cut them and hewed their bottoms as smoothly as I could. Then I made notches in them near the top of their crooks and fitted a stout stick into the notches and secured it with nails driven by the ax-head. Thus I got a hold for my evener. That done, I chopped and hewed an arch to cross the middle of the runners and hold them apart and used all my nails to secure and brace it. I got the two boards which were fastened together and constituted my wagon seat and laid them over the arch and front brace. How to make them fast was my worst problem. I succeeded in splitting a green stick to hold the bolt of the evener just under its head while I heated its lower end in the fire and kept its head cool with snow. With this I burnt a hole in the end of each board and fastened them to the front brace with withes of moosewood.

It was late in the day and there was no time for the slow process of burning more holes, so I notched the other ends of the boards and lashed them to the rear brace with a length of my reins. Then I retempered my bolt and brought up the grist and chain and fastened the latter between the boards in the middle of the front brace, hitched my team to the chain and set out again, sitting on the bags.

It was pitch dark and the horses wading to their bellies and the snow coming faster when we turned into Rattleroad. Soon I heard a loud halloo and knew that it was the voice of Uncle Peabody. He had started out to meet me in the storm and Shep was with him.

"Thank God I've found ye!" he shouted. "I'm blind and tired out and I couldn't keep a lantern goin' to save me. Are ye froze?"

"I'm all right, but these horses are awful tired. Had to let 'em rest every few minutes."

I told him about the wagon—and how it relieved me to hear him say:

"As long as you're all right, boy, I ain't goin' to worry 'bout the ol' wagon—not a bit. Where'd ye git yer jumper?"

"Made it with the ax and some nails," I answered.

After we got to the barn door at last he went to the house and lighted his lantern and came back with it wrapped in a blanket and Aunt Deel came with him.

How proud it made me to hear him say:

"Deel, our boy is a man now—made this jumper all 'lone by himself an' has got through all right."

She came and held the lantern up to my face and looked at my hands.

"Well, my stars, Bart!" she exclaimed in a moment. "I thought ye would freeze up solid—ayes—poor boy!"

We carried the grist in and Aunt Deel made some pudding. How good it was to feel the warmth of the fire and of the hearts of those who loved me! How I enjoyed the pudding and milk and bread and butter!

"I guess you've gone through the second peril that ol' Kate spoke of," said Aunt Deel as I went upstairs.

Uncle Peabody went out to look at the horses.

When I awoke in the morning I observed that Uncle Peabody's bed had not been slept in. I hurried down and heard that our off horse had died in the night of colic. Aunt Deel was crying. As he saw me Uncle Peabody began to dance a jig in the middle of the floor.

"Balance yer partners!" he shouted. "You an' I ain't goin' to be discouraged if all the hosses die—be we, Bart!"

"Never," I answered.

"That's the talk! If nec'sary we'll hitch Purvis up with t'other hoss an' git our haulin' done."

He and Purvis roared with laughter and the strength of the current swept me along with them.

"We're the luckiest folks in the world, anyway," Uncle Peabody went on. "Bart's alive an' there's three feet o' snow on the level an' more comin' an' it's colder'n Greenland."

It was such a bitter day that we worked only three hours and came back to the house and played Old Sledge by the fireside.

Rodney Barnes came over that afternoon and said that he would lend us a horse for the hauling.

We had good sleighing after that and got our bark and salts to market and earned $98. But while we got our pay in paper "bank money," we had to pay our debts in wheat, salts or corn, so that our earnings really amounted to only $62.50, my uncle said. We gave the balance and ten bushels of wheat to Mr. Grimshaw for a spavined horse, after which he agreed to give us at least a year's extension on the principal.

We felt easy then.

CHAPTER VII.

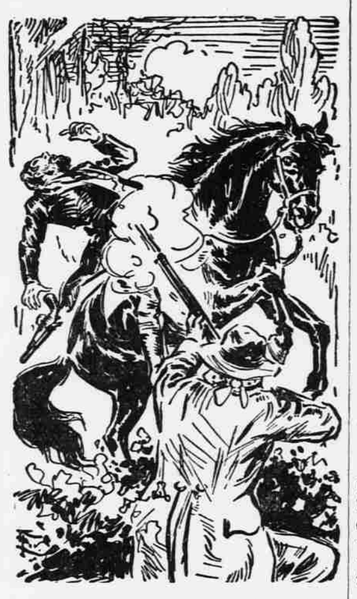
My Third Peril.

"Mr. Purvis" took his pay in salts and stayed with us until my first great adventure cut him off. It came one July day when I was in my sixteenth year. He behaved badly, and I, as any normal boy would have done who had had my schooling in the candle light. We had kept Grimshaw from our door by paying interest and the sum of $80 on the principal. It had been hard work to live comfortably and carry the burden of debt. Again Grimshaw had begun to press us. My uncle wanted to get his paper and learn, if possible, when the senator was expected in Canton.

So he gave me permission to ride with Purvis to the post office—a distance of three miles—to get the mail. Purvis rode in our only saddle and I bareback, on a handsome white filly which my uncle had given me soon after she was foaled. I had fed and petted and broken and groomed her and she had grown so fond of me that my whistled call would bring her galloping from the remotest reaches of the pasture. I had named her Sally because that was the only name which seemed to express my fondness.

"Mr. Purvis" was not an experienced rider. My filly led him at a swift gallop over the hills, and I heard many a muttered complaint behind me, but she liked a free head when we took the road together, and I let her have her way.

Coming back we fell in with another rider who had been resting at Seaver's little tavern through the heat of the



A Gun Went Off in the Edge of the Bushes Close By.

day. He was a traveler on his way to Canton and had missed the right trail and wandered far afield. He had a big military saddle with bags and shiny brass trimmings and a pistol in a holster, all of which appealed to my eye and interest. The filly was a little tired and the stranger and I were riding abreast at a walk while Purvis trailed behind us.

We heard a quick stir in the bushes by the roadside.

"What's that?" Purvis demanded in a half-whisper of excitement. We stopped.

Then promptly a voice—a voice which I did not recognize—broke the silence with these menacing words, sharply spoken:

"Your money or your life!"

"Mr. Purvis" whirled his horse and slashed him up the hill. Glancing backward, I saw him lose a stirrup and fall and pick himself up and run as if his life depended on it. I saw the stranger draw his pistol. A gun went off in the edge of the bushes close by. The flash of fire from its muzzle leaped at the stranger. The horses reared and plunged and mine threw me in a clump of small popples by the roadside and dashed down the hill.

My fall on the stony siding had stunned me and I lay for three or four seconds, as nearly as I can estimate it, in a strange and peaceful dream. Why did I dream of Amos Grimshaw coming to visit me again, and why, above all, should it have seemed to me that enough things were said and done in that little flash of a dream to fill a whole day—enough of talk and play and going and coming, the whole ending with a talk on the haymow? Again and again I have wondered about that dream. I came to and lifted my head and my consciousness swung back upon the track of memory and took up the thread of the day, the briefest remove from where it had broken.

I peered through the bushes. The light was unchanged. I could see quite clearly. The horses were gone. It was very still. The stranger lay helpless in the road and a figure was bending over him. It was a man with a handkerchief hanging over his face with holes cut opposite his eyes. He had not seen my fall and thought, as I learned later, that I had ridden away.

His gun lay beside him, its stock toward me. I observed that a piece of wood had been split off the lower side of the stock. I jumped to my feet and seized a stone to hurl at him. As I did so the robber fled with gun in hand. If the gun had been loaded I suppose that this little history would never have been written. Quickly I hurled the stone at the robber. I remember it was a smallish stone about the size of a hen's egg. I saw it graze the side of his head. I saw his hand touch the place which the stone had grazed. He reeled and nearly fell and recovered himself and ran on, but the little stone had put the mark of Cain upon him.

The stranger lay still in the road. I lifted his head and dropped it quickly with a strange sickness. The feel of it and the way it fell back upon the ground when I let go scared me, for I knew that he was dead. The dust around him was wet. I ran down the hill a few steps and stopped and whistled to my filly. I could hear her answering whinny far down the dusty road and then her hoofs as she galloped toward me. She came within a few feet of me and stood snorting. I caught and mounted her and rode to the nearest house for help. On the way I saw why she had stopped. A number of horses were feeding on the roadside near the log house where Andrew Crampton lived. Andrew had just unloaded some hay and was backing out of his barn. I hitched my filly and jumped on the rack saying:

"Drive up the road as quick as you can. A man has been murdered."

What a fearful word it was that I had spoken! What a panic it made in the little dooryard! The man gasped and jerked the reins and shouted to his horses and began swearing. The woman uttered a little scream and the children ran crying to her side.

The physical facts which are further related to this tragedy are of little moment to me now. The stranger was dead and we took his body to our home and my uncle set out for the constable. Over and over again that night I told the story of the shooting. We went to the scene of the tragedy with lanterns and fenced it off and put some men on guard there.

In the morning they found the robber's footprints in the damp dirt of the road and measured them. The whole countryside was afire with excitement and searching the woods and fields for the highwayman.

The stranger was buried. There was nothing upon him to indicate his name or residence. Weeks passed with no news of the man who had slain him. I had told of the gun with a piece of wood broken out of its stock, but no one knew of any such weapon in or near Lickitysplit.

One day Uncle Peabody and I drove up to Grimshaw's to make a payment of money. I remember it was gold and silver which we carried in a little sack. I asked where Amos was and Mrs. Grimshaw—a timid, tired-looking, bony little woman who was never seen outside of her own house—said that he was working out on the farm of a Mr. Beekman near Plattsburg. He had gone over on the stage late in June to hire out for the haying. I observed that my uncle looked very thoughtful as we rode back home and had little to say.

"You never had any idee who that robber was, did ye?" he asked by and by.

"No—I could not see plain—it was so dusk," I said.

The swift words, "Your money or your life," came out of my memory and rang in it. I felt its likeness to the scolding demands of Mr. Grimshaw, who was forever saying in effect:

"Your money or your home!"

That was like demanding our lives, because we couldn't live without our home. Our all was in it. Mr. Grimshaw's gun was the power he had over us, and what a terrible weapon it was! I credit him with never realizing how terrible.

We came to the sandhills and then Uncle Peabody broke the silence by saying:

"I wouldn't give fifty cents for as much o' this land as a bird could fly around in a day."

Then for a long time I heard only the sound of feet and wheels muffled in the sand, while my uncle sat looking thoughtfully at the siding. When I spoke to him he seemed not to hear me.

Before we reached home I knew what was in his mind, but neither dared speak of it.

People came from Canton and all the neighboring villages to see and talk with me, and among them were the Dunkelbergs. Unfounded tales of my bravery had gone abroad.

Sally seemed to be very glad to see me. We walked down to the brook and up into the maple grove and back through the meadows.

The beauty of that perfect day was upon her. I remember that her dress was like the color of its fireweed blossoms and that the blue of its sky was in her eyes and the yellow of the sunlight in her hair and the red of its clover in her cheeks. I remember how the August breezes played with her hair, flinging its golden curving strands about her neck and shoulders so that it touched my face, now and then, as we walked! Somehow the rustle of her dress started a strange vibration in my spirit. I put my arm around her waist and she put her arm around mine as we ran along. A curious feeling came over me. I stopped and loosed my arm.

"It's very warm!" I said as I picked a stalk of fireweed.

What was there about the girl which so thrilled me with happiness?

She turned away and felt the ribbon by which her hair was gathered at the back of her head.

After a moment of silence I ventured:

"I guess you've never fallen in love."

"Yes, I have."

"Who with?"

"I don't think I dare tell you," she answered, slowly, looking down as she walked.

"I'll tell you who I love if you wish," I said.

"Who?"

"You." I whispered the word and was afraid she would laugh at me, but she didn't.

We stopped and listened to the song

"Will You Love Me Always and Forever?"

of a bird—I do not remember what bird it was—and then she whispered:

"Will you love me always and forever?"

"Yes," I answered in the careless way of youth.

She stopped and looked into my eyes and I looked into hers.

"May I kiss you?" I asked, and afraid, with cheeks burning.

She turned away and answered: "I guess you can if you want to."

Now I seem to be in Aladdin's tower and to see her standing so red and graceful and innocent in the sunlight, and that strange fire kindled by our kisses warms my blood again.

That night I heard a whispered conference below after I had gone upstairs. I knew that something was coming and wondered what it might be. Soon Uncle Peabody came up to our little room looking highly serious. I sat, half undressed and rather fearful, looking into his face. As I think of the immaculate soul of the boy, I feel a touch of pathos in that scene. I think that he felt it, for I remember that his whisper trembled a little as he began to tell me why men are strong and women are beautiful and given in marriage.

"You'll be falling in love one o' these days," he said. "It's natural ye should. You remember Rovin' Kate?" he asked by and by.

"Yes," I answered.

"Some day when you're a little older I'll tell ye her story an' you'll see what happens when men an' women break the law o' God. Here's Mr Wright's letter. Aunt Deel asked me to give it to you to keep. You're old enough now an' you'll be goin' away to school before long, I guess."

I took the letter and read again the superscription on its envelope:

"To Master Barton Baynes:
(To be opened when he leaves home to go to school)."

I put it away in the pine box with leather hinges on its cover which Uncle Peabody had made for me and wondered again what it was all about, and again that night I broke camp and moved further into the world over the silent trails of knowledge.

Uncle Peabody went away for a few days after the harvesting. He had gone afoot, I knew not where. He returned one afternoon in a buggy with the great Michael Hacket of the Canton academy. Hacket was a big, brawny, red-haired, kindly Irishman with a merry heart and tongue, the latter having a touch of the brogue of the green isle which he had never seen, for he had been born in Massachusetts and had got his education in Harvard. He was then a man of forty.

"You're coming to me this fall," he said as he put his hand on my arm and gave me a little shake. "Lad! you've got a pair of shoulders! Ye shall live in my house an' help with the chores if ye wish to."

"That'll be grand," said Uncle Peabody, but, as to myself, just then, I knew not what to think of it.

[END OF BOOK ONE.]

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

A Cool One.

"I worry so over your shortcomings that my dresses no longer fit me." "Yes, mum," said the cook. "Then I suppose you wouldn't mind giving me one or two?"—Louisville Courier-Journal.

The Razor in Civilization.

Busts of the Caesars show them to have been clean-shaven. Men in the eighteenth century relied still further on the barber's art, for they shaved their heads as well. Hogarth has painted a beau of this period who by some chance had his wig removed, which gives him the look of an elderly baby. The uncouth appearance of the barbarians, which shocked the Romans, was due a good deal to the neglect of these wild men to dress their hair.

Small Things Once Precious.

In the reign of Henry VIII, a needle was so valuable a thing that an English comedy was written about the loss of one. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth, a pair of gloves were held to be a fitting gift for the sovereign. Henry IV of France, a poor and a frugal monarch, committed one extravagance, which was commented upon by the court and noted down in Sully's memoirs. He used as many handkerchiefs as he required when he had a cold in his head.